

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE REFERENDUM



CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS

As Christians, we are invited into a new life in Christ. [The Uluru Statement](#) From the Heart similarly invites us to live and journey together in hope.¹ This short reflection considers how Catholic Social Teachings (CSTs) might help us along the way. Following Jesus's example, at this time in our shared history, as at other key moments in our reconciliation journey, our first step is to recognise one another's human dignity.

Human Dignity is a God-given "quality of being human, independent of ethnicity, creed, gender, sexuality, age or ability". It affirms the Christian "belief that every person is made in the image of God and is intrinsically valuable and worthy of respect, simply because they are human".²

Learning about the Country, Culture, Language and everyday realities of First Nations Peoples where you live is one step towards seeing, affirming and celebrating the human dignity of First Australians. Considering all points of view ahead of the referendum "to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice"³ is another.

Subsidiarity builds on the idea that people and groups have the right to participate in decisions affecting them. More than just promoting **participation**, it means that when people and groups can't meet their own needs, other parts of society (e.g. the Government) act according to their duty to assist with resources and support.

The proposal to amend the Constitution to recognise Australia's First Nations Peoples, including through the Voice, is an example of this CST in action. As the [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council \(NATSICC\)](#) explains, "Your support of our voices on important issues helps to make Subsidiarity a reality."⁴

The Common Good underpins our life together. It helps ensure people realise their full potential as individuals and communities. More than just sharing what we have, the common good is "what happens when individual rights to personal possessions and community resources are balanced with our collective responsibility to meet the needs of others."⁵

When we consider the common good, we accept our collective responsibility to 'close the gap', that is, to see and meet the needs of First Nations Peoples who experience inequity and other injustices, including homelessness, poverty and incarceration, at disproportionate rates.⁶

Solidarity is relational. By definition, it's "a firm and persevering commitment to the common good, which reminds us that everything is related... It's a way of saying, 'I'm here with you.'⁷ When we practice solidarity, we act in ways that accompany others in their own life

experiences. Learning about First Nations Peoples' challenges and joining them as they campaign for justice is one example.

Solidarity also reminds us that we are much stronger and better when we are together. It compels us to lift one another up. The Referendum on the Voice is an opportunity to listen to First Australians and come together as one, united by mutual respect and compassion.

Care for Our Common Home helps us preserve creation for future generations. "A way of appreciating the earth, not as a commodity but as a sacred space, a gift from God". Care for our common home is "an approach to looking after God's creation by 'tilling' (cultivating or working) and 'keeping' (caring, protecting and preserving) it".⁸

Learning from First Nations Peoples' wisdom is important to reconciliation. If enshrined in Law, the Voice to Parliament could be a mechanism for First Australians to share their knowledge on caring for the environment in more strategic and coordinated ways that benefit all, for example, by offering advice on such things as sustainable land management methods.

Preferential Option for the Poor is demonstrated by the "act of prioritising the needs of the poor over the desires of the rich, the rights of workers over profits and the preservation of the environment over its exploitation".⁹

Amending the Constitution is a way of responding in love to the unjust circumstances in which First Nations Australians live. Fr Frank Brennan challenges Catholics to, "Know your history; know the Aboriginal history."¹⁰ He emphasises that First Australians belong in our Country's collective story and in the law that guides our common life. This change needs to be a matter of priority.

QUESTIONS

- How do Catholic Social Teachings shape your experience and expression of faith?
- Noel Pearson explains that, due to the ongoing injustice they experience, many First Nations people feel "unloved" by their fellow Australians.¹¹ Following Jesus's commandment "to love one another", how do you, your household and community show love for First Nations Australian people?
- How could the activities of truth-telling and agreement-making help address the inequity and other injustice experienced by First Nations Peoples in Australia?

- Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann offers the concept of Dadirri or deep listening as a practice that can help us along our journey of reconciliation.¹² Reflect on the sounds and voices you are listening to. Do they resonate with CST principles? Are there other, different voices you are yet to hear?
- Stan Grant emphasises the need for compassion in our conversations about the Voice to Parliament.¹³ How will you demonstrate compassion in your interactions with others (including with differing views) about the Voice and related matters of justice for First Nations Peoples?

PRAYER

Creator,
You beautifully, wonderfully make us.
May we go your way of love.

Christ,
You lead us to reconciliation.
May we go your way of justice.

Spirit,
You move us on the journey.
May we go your way of breath.

Amen

Written by Dr Rebekah Pryor (Caritas Australia) with Craig Arthur (NATSICC)

1. The Uluru Statement From the Heart, <https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/view-the-statement/>
2. Caritas Australia, Catholic Social Teachings Card Set, 2022.
3. Prime Minister of Australia, Media Release, March 23, 2023 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/next-step-towards-voice-referendum-constitutional-alteration-bill>
4. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council (NATSICC) <https://www.natsicc.org.au/first-nations-voices-on-html>
5. Caritas Australia, Catholic Social Teachings Card Set, 2022.
6. Closing the Gap, "Closing the Gap Targets and Outcomes," <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/targets>
7. Caritas Australia, Catholic Social Teachings Card Set, 2022.
8. Caritas Australia, Catholic Social Teachings Card Set, 2022.
9. Caritas Australia, Catholic Social Teachings Card Set, 2022.
10. Frank Brennan, "Fr Frank Brennan SJ: How to Vote on the Voice," The Catholic Weekly, March 17, 2023 <https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/fr-frank-brennan-sj-how-to-vote-on-the-voice/>
11. For example, listen to the first of First Nations leader, lawyer, academic and activist Noel Pearson's four ABC Boyer Lectures, "Who we were, who we are, and who we can be," November 4, 2022 <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/boyerlectures/who-we-were-who-we-are-and-who-we-can-be/14095284>. See also Wiradjuri academic, journalist and presenter.
12. See Miriam Rose Foundation, YouTube, "Dadirri (Official Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Video): 3 minute promo," https://youtu.be/tow2tR_ezL8.
13. Stan Grant, "As we debate the Indigenous Voice to Parliament there is one word mission: Compassion," February 5, 2023 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-02-05/voice-to-parliament-debate-stan-grant-compassion-is-needed/101928250>